BY CHRIS BRATT

MY OPINION FROM BEHIND THE GREEN DOOR

If you live anywhere within the Applegate, there have been a lot of opinions expressed these past few months about the Bureau of Land Management’s (BLM) proposed Forest Plan Revision. BLM and their proponents claim the Revision Plan will economically “benefit our county” and still meet the agency’s environmental obligations. Specifically, they say the Revision Plan will fund critical county services up to 94 percent of historical levels. These Forest Plan Revisions, which will affect a major part of the Applegate watershed, are being touted by BLM, county officials and timber interests as reconnecting “communities to forest management.” They state their goal is to “meet the economic needs for local communities and protect our forest for generations to come.”

In my judgment, the above statements and conclusions don’t represent the real state of things, events or facts about BLM’s forest management for our public lands. The truth is that BLM is planning to reverse management direction from their present conservation-oriented Forest Plans to a Revised Plan that places timber production above other uses.

The present BLM Forest Plan is being revised solely to provide a lot more profitable products for the timber industry and perhaps some additional revenue for our inept counties. Where federal judges and scientists have determined that BLM’s present Forest Plan is the bare minimum needed to meet the legal requirements of the Endangered Species Act and other laws, BLM’s plan revision is recommending far lower protections for species and their habitats. One has to ask, how can BLM’s Forest Plan Revision, which proposes a three-fold increase in logging and places timber production over other land uses and values, not dramatically reduce the health of the land and resources they manage?

A recent essay by Curtis White in the August 2007 Harper’s magazine identified for me the rationalizations we humans and agencies like BLM use in our practice of forest conservation. Curtis White says: “We are willing to think that what we need is a balance between the requirements of human economies and the ‘needs’ of the natural world. It is as if we were negotiating a trade agreement with the animals and trees unlucky enough to share space with us. What do you need? We ask them. What are your minimum requirements? We need to know the minimum because we’re going to consume any ‘excess,’ unless, of course, you taste good. There is always room for an animal that tastes good.”

I also think of the famous forester/essayist Aldo Leopold, and what he might have said about BLM’s Plan Revision and land ethic. In 1966 he wrote, “Many foresters are quite content to grow trees like cabbages, with cellulose as the basic forest commodity. A system of conservation based solely on economic self-interest is hopelessly lopsided.” Leopold and I believe economics should not determine all land use. In this case, BLM can’t see the forest for the economic value of the trees.

Whatever happened to the conservation land ethic that BLM adopted in their present Forest Plans in 1994? Where are the voices of foresters who embraced that ethic? They have, no doubt, been silenced by the economics of keeping their jobs.

The agency’s vision and strategy in 1994 states that they would manage the land and natural resources “to help enhance and maintain the ecological health of the environment and the social well-being of human populations.” They also said, “Resource management must be focused on ecological principles that reduce the need for single resource or species management.” Now they are planning to manage for a single resource (timber) as the dominant use of the forest, across 2.6 million acres.

If implemented, BLM’s Forest Plan Revision will become a disaster for our public forestlands. Based on faulty assumptions, it will trigger a huge increase in logging levels, worsening a host of environmental problems here in the Applegate. In addition, BLM is disposing of our present Applegate Adaptive Management Area (AMA) designation. In its place, our watershed will become an intensive Timber Management Area (TMA). The alternative management strategies successfully implemented over the past 13 years will give way to “getting the cut out.” Without the protection of the Applegate AMA designation, we are bound to see a lot more negative impacts to resources throughout the watershed.

So, if you value these public forest lands beyond their capacity to supply board feet for timber interests and inconstant money to the counties, be sure to let BLM and your Congress folks know how you feel. BLM’s official comment period for addressing their Draft Revision Plan ends on December 10, 2007. But it is important to send your comments even after that date. Most local conservation groups in the area already have made their evaluations of BLM’s plan revision and could help you with your comments. If you have trouble, let me know.

Chris Bratt • 541-846-6988

About face

Applegator November-December 2007
New Battle of Logging vs. Spotted Owls Looms in West

By FELICITY BARRINGER

GALICE, Ore. — A 1990s’ truce that quieted the bitter wars between loggers and environmentalists in the Pacific Northwest is in danger of collapse.

With that truce, made final in 1994 by the Clinton administration, the northern spotted owl, a threatened species, seemed to be getting the breathing space it needed to regroup. While some land was opened to loggers, nearly twice as much was set aside for owls’ hunting grounds. But more than a decade later, their numbers continue to decline faster than expected.

Now the truce, the Northwest Forest Plan, is in jeopardy as one of the parties to it, the Bureau of Land Management, is rethinking its participation. It is proposing a threefold increase in logging on its 2.2 million acres in western Oregon, with greater increases in the old-growth stands that are the owls’ preferred territory. The land agency’s action would reduce by 10 percent the territory covered by the Northwest Forest Plan.

But environmentalists and scientists argue that the agency’s proposal will torpedo the whole Northwest Forest Plan, which encompassed 24 million acres, and damage the spotted owl’s chances for survival.

Jerry Franklin, a professor of ecosystem analysis at the College of Forest Resources at the University of Washington, said, “We are on the cusp of a point where the whole edifice could collapse.”

If the land agency’s share is taken out, the plan’s objectives in providing old-growth habitat for the owl cannot be met, Mr. Franklin said.

Dick Prather, the Bureau of Land Management official leading the project to revise the forest plans, said the new strategy tried to remedy the failure of the Northwest Forest Plan to produce the amount of lumber expected.

Whether the agency’s move will lead to a new round of timber wars is unknown. The conflict in the 1980s was a public relations defeat for all concerned, with environmentalists being painted as extremists and timber interests as wantonly destructive.

But here on the steep, forested hillsides along the Rogue River, a skirmish over the fate of 514 acres of old trees offers a taste of what might happen in the current tug of war over timber.

At issue is a timber sale, informally called the Kelsey-Whisky sale after nearby creeks that feed the Rogue River. It contains growing Douglas firs 100 years old or more, which provide the kind of landscape the owls favor.

When cut, the trees become lumber for companies like the Rough & Ready Lumber Company of Cave Junction, Ore.

Rough & Ready’s owners plan to turn the timber into building materials and expect to make a profit, despite the current housing slump, said Jennifer Phillippi, the company’s president.

But the spotted owl’s needs have gotten in the way.

As required by the Endangered Species Act, the federal Fish and Wildlife Service judged that sales like the Kelsey-Whisky one would not endanger the species’ eventual recovery.

That decision was challenged in court by the Oregon Natural Resources Council, now renamed Oregon Wild. Doug Heiken, a representative of that group, said the fish and wildlife agency had given no indication of how many owls would be harmed by this logging.

With court reversal of the agency’s judgment likely, the Fish and Wildlife Service withdrew the Kelsey-Whisky sale, and plans for logging were suspended.

On the larger landscape, the Bureau of Land Management’s plan must have a similar scientific underpinning. An advisory committee has devised a plan that allows for some increase in logging — but not as much as the agency first proposed.

Bush administration officials in Washington suggested that a second option be prepared. As written, that option could allow for much more logging on the 2.2 million acres.

The new option sets aside no territory to protect the owl. Instead, it provides for ad-hoc decisions based on ongoing evaluations of the owl’s health. Crucial to both options was a determination that owls can thrive outside old-growth stands.

This summer, scientists, including those whose work was cited by the fish and wildlife agency, accused the service of misusing and cherry-picking the available science.

In response, Lynn Scarlett, deputy secretary of the Interior Department, said the Washington supervisors had asked if a second option was feasible. In an interview, Ms. Scarlett said: “The idea that any science was interfered with could not be more inaccurate. No scientific judgment changed, no scientific conclusions were altered — just zip, zero.”

Still, the scientific outcry insures that the recovery plan will be reworked. David Wesley, the director of the Oregon Natural Resources Council, said: “We did push a little too far” by using inadequate data when determining where owls can thrive.

If the fish and wildlife advisers decide the owl needs more old-growth forest, the land agency, like Rough & Ready Lumber, will have a plan without a scientific blessing. If not, the agency could probably proceed with expanded logging.

In that case, environmentalists say, the truce protecting the owl would be dead.
BLM plan no help to timber counties

Rural Oregonians should take note of the recent release of the Bureau of Land Management’s Western Oregon Plan Revision. The WOPR will guide the management of more than 2.2 million acres of federal timber land in Oregon that have played a central role in our way of life, our economy and our county governments for decades.

The BLM proposes to return timber harvest levels back to the 1980s, when many of Oregon’s rural counties were flush in timber dollars.

Unfortunately, the federal agency’s attempt to turn back the clock delivers a real blow to efforts by timber-dependent county governments throughout Oregon to make a long overdue transition into the 21st century.

Surely bureau officials would agree it is highly unlikely that these forest lands will ever produce the level of timber receipts we saw in the 1980s, because federal land management laws simply won’t allow it. Given that dose of reality, the bureau’s preferred alternative in the WOPR will only serve to distract and confuse citizens in timber-dependent counties faced with the task of developing local funding sources to replace diminishing federal payments.

During the 1960s, ’70s and ’80s, these BLM-controlled lands provided logs that fueled local economies throughout rural Oregon.

Timber receipts generated by these lands paid for county services such as sheriff’s patrols. In fact, there was so much cash rolling in from timber receipts in the 1970s that Josephine County government didn’t levy any property taxes for county operations.

In the 1980s, the continued cutting of old-growth trees began to bump up against the National Clean Water Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, the Endangered Species Act and other federal environmental laws. Court decisions based on these laws were conclusive:

The clear-cutting of old-growth forests conflicted with a plethora of federal environmental laws. Since the early 1990s, federal forests have produced anemic harvest levels — and timber receipts for rural Oregon counties plummeted to near zero. Since then, Congress has stepped in to provide “safety net” funding to 18 of Oregon’s 36 counties, so rural communities can continue to provide basic services to their citizens.

While timber-dependent county governments have struggled to transition from high timber harvests, the private sector in affected communities like Grants Pass and Medford has come a long way in its economic transition to tourism, health care and service jobs that serve the region’s growing community of retirees.

Today, census statistics reflect a Grants Pass economy that is stronger than it has ever been. From 1960 through 1990, Josephine County median household income consistently ranked in the bottom three among Oregon’s 36 counties. By 2006, the county had moved up several notches to No. 29.

While businesses and residents have adapted to the new economy, most timber-dependent county governments in Oregon still depend on federal safety net funds. For example, more than 65 percent of Josephine County’s general fund is financed by “safety net” payments.

So why have so many counties failed to make the inevitable transition?

In the last May election, many of these counties attempted to pass local tax levies of some sort to begin the transition, but in every case, the voters said no. During levy campaigns last spring, Oregon congressional delegates assured their constituents they were going to secure an extension of safety net funds. Many county commissioners like myself were hopeful they would prevail — and sure enough they did — if only for one more year.

You can bet those voters who voted no on these levies because they were banking on Congress to deliver were feeling pretty smug.

Now, the BLM has sent a strong signal to our citizens that they still need not make the transition toward self-sufficiency. The bureau proposes a return to harvest levels of the 1980s so timber receipts can once again pay for county services. For rural Oregon taxpayers who aren’t anxious to shoulder the cost of local programs, the bureau’s call to turn back the clock sounds awfully good. The problem is, it’s too good to be true.

With no detectable changes whatsoever in federal land management laws, how can the BLM pronounce that things are different now? Are present and future court decisions really going to change just because the bureau believes they should?

The last 15 years certainly contradicts that perspective. Is the current Congress really going to allow more logging on federal lands than we’ve seen in over 15 years? I don’t think so!

Until the WOPR was released, most counties were beginning to acknowledge the inevitable: Federal payments are eventually going to end. By proposing that timber receipts will once again fund county services in rural counties, the BLM’s proposal only serves to confuse and distract citizens.

I am committed to working for more timber receipts than we have seen since the mid-1990s, and I’ll be supporting an alternative in the WOPR that would do just that.

But we must face the fact that federal timber money will never cover the entire bill again and, therefore, we need to develop local revenue sources. To achieve that goal, we have to hope the BLM will stop playing politics and provide a forest plan that is based on reality.

Without such fanciful distractions, I am hopeful timber-dependent counties throughout Oregon can at last make the transition to more self-reliant and fiscally stable county governments.

Dave Toler was elected a Josephine County commissioner in November of last year.
Bush points BLM in wrong direction

By JOSEPH VAILE

If there is one thing that makes passions run high, it's the management of public lands. Most everyone, near and far, appreciates Oregon's public forests and rivers. Many residents value public forests for recreation, hunting, fishing and clean water. Visitors from all over come to our backyards and contribute millions of dollars to local economies every year through tourism and recreation on federal lands.

Regrettably, a proposal just announced by the Bush administration places all of this in jeopardy. The plans, called the Western Oregon Plan Revisions (WOPR), announced in early August, encompass an enormous forested area in Western Oregon (4,000 square miles) and would allow massive clearcutting of currently protected old-growth and streamside forest on federal lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

The WOPR also proposes to drastically boost the use of noisy off-road vehicles (like those in the John's Peak/Timber Mountain Area outside Jacksonville), slash stream protections and dump longstanding safeguards for salmon and wildlife.

Unfortunately, there are many in county government — and opportunistic timber interests — banking on the ramp-up of old-growth and streamside logging from the WOPR to bring in money. Between the 1940s and 1980s, county governments were given a percentage of the money from timber sale receipts from logging public forests. By the 1980s, bloated county budgets from widespread old-growth logging put salmon runs and wildlife close to extinction and the money dried up.

While old-growth logging might sound like an easy solution, a financial bust is predictable under the Bush plan and there are several reasons why the WOPR is doomed to fail.

First and foremost, in order to ramp up logging, laws put in place to protect fish, wildlife and old-growth forests will need to be bent or broken. And the values of these public forests will diminish, as old-growth logging increases to unrealistic levels. Banking on thousands upon thousands of acres of old-growth logging every year to pay for county services will produce unpredictable outcomes at best, and at worst, gridlock and stagnation.

Additionally, the WOPR is the result of a sneaky and dishonest backroom agreement known as "sue and settle" between the Bush administration and the timber industry. Such sweetheart settlements are generally brokered when industry's demands have little chance of winning in court.

In this case, the timber industry sued over the 1994 Northwest Forest Plan, claiming that the BLM forests could not be included in this landmark agreement. Rather than defend itself, the Bush administration chose to settle and went along with the industry's demands, which included removing protections for forests new included in the WOPR.

There is a better way.

In the early planning stages for WOPR, thousands of comments were submitted to the Bush administration asking for old-growth forest and stream protection and for the BLM to thin its second-growth forests and safeguard communities from wildfire. Many forest managers are already moving toward this common-sense goal by thinning previously logged and fire-suppressed public forests. Many forests are now overgrown and in need of thinning. They can provide wood to local mills while actually improving conditions for fish and wildlife and keeping saws out of old-growth forests. Studies estimate that these very tree plantations and fire-suppressed forest could offer more than 2 billion board feet of commercial timber on Western Oregon BLM forests.

Collaborative groups throughout Oregon are searching for the middle ground by bringing together loggers, local governments and conservation groups to try to get this done.

Certainly we all have a stake in finding a solution to county funding crises, but clear-cutting federal old growth in Oregon is not a sensible solution. For starters, we need to build local capacity to process small trees. A sustainable supply of wood products from small trees could help sustain essential public services.

Rather than focus on forest management that highlights common ground, the BLM is prioritizing controversial old growth clearcutting. Under the Bush plan for Oregon's public forests, nearly all of the timber volume would come from clearcutting old growth, not from thinning projects that would help restore public forests.

Under the WOPR, diverse interests that were once coming together to see small-diameter timber get to the mill will be forced back into their bunkers.

We ought to have more foresight than that.

Joseph Vaile is campaign director for the Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center and a former biologist for the Medford BLM.
BLM is at the center of these bitter controversies for many reasons. At the top of the list is the lack of a clear mission for use and protection of our public lands. Under more recent federal laws, like the Clean Water Act and the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, BLM is obligated to preserve these public lands for the good of the people at large. On the other hand, they are obligated by outdated and ineffective laws, like the General Mining Act of 1872 and the Oregon and California Lands Act of 1937, to make these public lands available to commercial interests for private benefit and profit.

This commercialization of our public lands has become an impediment to BLM’s conservation mission. It has continually led to the manipulation of the agency’s rules, regulations and orders by conservative appointees serving special interests. This political manipulation has resulted in BLM viewing these public lands as a property right for private rather than public benefit. This agency bias favoring corporate interests has produced many flawed policies and a long list of environmental abuses. Many conservationists, former BLM employees and government auditors often have testified that the use of political appointees in top BLM management positions has frequently skewed policies in favor of cattlemen, miners, loggers and other consumptive users.

At present here in the Applegate and throughout Oregon, we are faced with a perfect example of this perverse political interference. Scientific processes are being tampered with to accommodate timber interests, while accelerated old-growth logging is being planned on all of BLM’s public forest lands. Even though BLM’s present Resource Management Plan (forest plan) has achieved a good balance between retaining healthy forest habitats and removal of forest products, they are now seeking what they call “a better way to do business.”

BLM has gone back (with lots of political help) to a previous interpretation of their antiquated Oregon and California Lands Act of 1937. They say this is a law where timber extraction trumps protection of the environment. Although BLM’s present forest plans were judged by them to meet all legal, scientific and ecological requirements, new anticonservation forces in charge of the agency have pressed to cut more timber. These forces have compelled BLM, through a settlement agreement with the timber industry, to revise their forest plan. This forest plan revision provides for huge increases in timber sales volumes.

From my perspective, for the past decade BLM has favored commercial timber interests with more than adequate amounts of timber for sale. In fact, annual timber sales quantities need to be revised further downward to protect the environment. BLM has overestimated their ability to accomplish the intensity of management called for in their forest plans. In addition, reductions are needed in their annual sales quantities for failing to factor in the difficulties they have encountered using untested and untried management techniques. The continuing decline of the Northern Spotted Owl, brought on by extensive cutting in owl habitat over the past 13 years, also requires those further reductions in annual sales quantities to prevent the extinction of this endangered species.

In any case, the heavy corporate hands of BLM hierarchy are quite apparent, and they expect to prevail in these proposed BLM plan revisions. BLM will be pillaging the environment if we let them eliminate the existing habitat protections of the current forest plan. It’s time we, as concerned citizens, call a halt to the political manipulation, exploitation and degradation of these public forest treasures. This is the time to get involved and respond to BLM and our congressional representatives. Tell them you support maintaining the current Resource Management Plans of BLM and resent the political interference that has forced these plan revisions in the first place.

See the BLM plan revision side bar showing how you can comment and participate. Give me a call if you run into trouble.

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The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has recently issued the 1650 page draft of its Western Oregon Plan Revisions (WOPR) for public comment. Although the revisions were undertaken primarily in response to legal challenges from timber and logging interests, the WOPR also addresses recreational activities, specifically off highway vehicle (OHV) usage, primarily in the Medford District.

The OHV issues raised in the WOPR have a direct impact on the City of Jacksonville, the Jacksonville Forest Park, and much of the Rogue and Applegate valleys.

The conflict between residents and off highway vehicle (OHV) riders is a growing problem in the Johns Peak/Timber Mountain (Johns Peak) area. Although updates issued by the BLM prior to its release of the draft WOPR acknowledged significant conflicts over OHV usage in the Johns Peak area, the draft WOPR makes no such acknowledgement. In fact, the draft states that its “preferred alternative” is to designate Johns Peak an “OHV Emphasis Area.” The BLM describes an OHV Emphasis Area as “specially managed to accommodate motorized recreational activities” with other forms of recreation being deliberately discouraged—hikers, equestrians, mountain bikers, fishermen are not welcomed here!

As currently defined, this Johns Peak OHV Emphasis Area covers about 35,000 acres. It includes 16,375 acres managed by the BLM intermingled with another 16,000 to 18,000 acres of private land—a checkerboard pattern typical of the defunct Oregon & California (O&C) Railroad holdings.

The area is bordered on the east by Old Stage Road, on the south by Highway 238 continuing out past Ruch, on the west by the Applegate Valley, and on the north roughly by the Rogue River. This boundary takes in roughly a fifth of Jacksonville, and much of Ruch. At present, there are over 1,000 privately owned lots within the boundaries of the proposed OHV area and hundreds of residences that either border it or lie along its major access routes and trailheads.

The imposition of an OHV Emphasis Area in an area that includes thousands of acres of privately-owned land and hundreds of residences is unprecedented by the BLM or any other public land management agency in the United States. Although the BLM cannot open properties it does not own to OHV usage, it lacks the ability and the resources to prevent OHVs either deliberately or inadvertently intruding on private property from adjacent BLM lands. The BLM also lacks the ability and the resources to mitigate the environmental impact of OHV usage.

The Johns Peak area contains significant environmental indicators that do not support OHV use. The thin, fragile soils are prone to severe erosion. The area is the only mid-level elevation migratory corridor between the Rogue and Applegate rivers. Numerous streams in the area (Slagle Creek, Humbug Creek, Forest Creek, Jackson Creek, Kane Creek, Galls Creek, Birdseye Creek and Foots Creek) are primary contributors to these rivers. Many of these streams are also Class II streams subject to protection by the State Department of Fish and Wildlife. Additionally Johns Peak and surrounding residential communities are classified as “extreme” fire prone areas as designated in the Oregon Department of Forestry’s Forestland-Urban Interface Fire Protection Act.

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The BLM is not honoring the Executive Order 11644 requirements by Executive Order 11644 requires the BLM to ensure public OHV “compatibility ... with existing conditions in populated areas, taking into account noise and other factors.” The BLM is not honoring the Executive Order when private homeowners are increasingly subjected to harsh noise and blatant trespassing of OHV riders, when streams in the area are being polluted, wildlife disrupted and fragile soils damaged. It is time for the BLM to eliminate the conflicts as required by Executive Order 11644.

The Medford District BLM has worked closely with OHV enthusiasts to promote this area, yet few of the riders live in or around the area. Regardless of how they may argue for an OHV Emphasis Area designation, the land remains unsuitable for OHV use.
BLM still ignoring public on thinning

The Daily Courier has repeatedly argued that our public forests should be aggressively salvaged after wildfires, while largely ignoring the site-specific conditions of the affected watersheds.

Many of us in Southern Oregon remember that while the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest was "accidentally" salvage logged within the Babyfoot Botanical Area, clearcutting the Babyfoot Lake trailhead and poaching trees within the Kalmiopsis Wilderness Area, the Daily Courier was cheering on the disastrous logging bonanza.

Now the Daily Courier is upset because both the Southern Oregon District Court and the Ninth Circuit have ruled against the Medford District of the Bureau of Land Management's illegal plans to turn the Elk Creek old-growth reserve into yet another industrial fiber plantation via the Timbered Rock salvage timber sale.

The site-specific context of the illegal Timbered Rock salvage sale was simply ignored in the Daily Courier's ideological call for salvage logging anywhere and everywhere. From reading the Daily Courier, one would not know that all of the proposed salvage logging would have occurred within forests set aside for protection as the Elk Creek Late Successional Reserve. These reserve lands were protected by the Northwest Forest Plan, while other lands, known as the timber matrix, were identified as those forests in which logging and fiber production would play a dominant role. None of the lands proposed for logging in Timbered Rock were matrix logging lands. All of the lands proposed for logging by the BLM were classified as late-successional reserves.

The illegal Timbered Rock salvage logging would have occurred within forests designated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as critical to the recovery of the northern spotted owl, and in watersheds designated as key to the maintenance of healthy Rogue River salmon runs, which were deferred from logging by the BLM, due to the immense cumulative impacts from prior BLM logging and road construction activities.

Simply put, Elk Creek is one of the most important, and degraded, salmon and steelhead tributaries in the Rogue River Watershed.

Fortunately, the courts held that the BLM could not legally exploit the fire as an excuse to clear-cut within this protected old-growth reserve.

Nevertheless, extensive clear-cut logging has occurred and is continuing to occur near Elk Creek.

Approximately 6,000 acres of privately owned industrial timber industry lands within the burn have been salvage logged and are being managed exclusively for wood fiber production. Additionally, before the burn (and prior to the Northwest Forest Plan) the BLM had already converted 5,400 acres of native forest within the Elk Creek Watershed into fiber plantations. Approximately 80 percent of the total forest stands in the watershed have previously been subjected to some form of logging.

By any reasonable measure, the Elk Creek Watershed has clearly done more than its part to supply our nation's demand for wood fiber. Yet the BLM and the Daily Courier imply that unless we salvage log the last 20 percent of the remaining untouched forests in the watershed that the "balance" will have shifted too far towards environmental protection, rather than timber production.

We at the Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center estimate that well over 500,000 acres of native old-growth forests in southwest Oregon and northern California have already been converted into small-diameter fiber plantations on our public lands. Similarly, the Medford BLM has stated that over 770,000 acres of our public forestlands in southwest Oregon contain trees less than 12 inches wide that could be thinned. With less than 10 percent of the old-growth forests in the West Coast remaining upright, it is high time for the BLM to turn its focus toward managing those fiber plantations that it has already created, rather than continuing to convert old-growth forests into small-diameter fiber plantations.

The BLM has the opportunity to help resolve the controversy surrounding post-fire management by focusing its activities on restoration of burned stands and small-diameter thinning of green stands, while abandoning its obsession with logging large trees and snags within old-growth reserves in sensitive watersheds.

Unfortunately, rather than welcoming the opportunity to work collaboratively with local communities to promote small-diameter thinning to address fuel loading and reduce the impact of future wildfires, the BLM was expected to release this week a planning document titled the Western Oregon Plan Revisions, which is expected to open up vast tracts of streamside riparian reserves and late-successional reserves to additional old-growth logging.

While the BLM is busy removing the legal protections for streamside and old-growth reserves, the social consensus that we must shift the focus of federal timber management towards the thinning of existing fiber plantations and small-diameter fuels has never been stronger.

Sooner or later, the will of the majority of Americans will be heard, and federal forest policy will call for providing wood from ecologically beneficial second-growth thinning projects, rather than from illegal and divisive old-growth timber sales like Timbered Rock.

George Sexton is conservation director of the Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center, an environmental group based in Ashland.
The Bush administration's plans for saving the northern spotted owl from extinction have flunked a peer review by scientists.

Under a contract with the administration, the Society for Conservation Biology and the American Ornithologists' Union said the government did not consider all the best available science, a requirement of the Endangered Species Act, before making room for more logging in old-growth forests.

The organizations reviewed a draft recovery plan that rates the invasion of the barred owl into spotted owl territory a greater threat than habitat loss, as well as a proposal to reduce critical habitat for the owl by 22 percent.

The two proposals are key to plans to bring back clearcut logging in old-growth forests on U.S. Bureau of Land Management forests in Western Oregon, aimed at increasing timber production and restoring timber revenue to county governments.

The reviewers of the recovery plan said there appears to be a scientific consensus that the plans would not only fail to bring back owl populations but also would result in downgrading its status from threatened to endangered.

The bird has suffered over the long term from logging in its old-growth forest habitat, and in the last few years it has faced a threat from an invasive relative, the barred owl.

"The recovery team failed to make use of the best available science and, in fact, appears to have selectively cited from the available science to justify a reduction in habitat protection," they wrote. "Based on current information, far too much emphasis is placed on the adverse effects of barred owl range expansion."

A separate review of the proposal to reduce critical habitat for the owl by 22 percent earned an even harsher review, expressed in a letter from society North American Section President Reed Noss and society policy director John Fitzgerald in a letter dated Friday to Fish and Wildlife Field Supervisor Kemper McMaster.

"Our main recommendation to (Fish and Wildlife) is to scrap the draft recovery plan, convene a panel of independent scientists and ecologists to redo the recovery plan, and place on hold related forest policy decisions ... until a new recovery plan is completed based on the best available science," they wrote.

The spotted owl was declared a threatened species in 1990 due primarily to heavy logging in the forests where it nests and feeds. Lawsuits from conservation groups led to a reduction of more than 80 percent in logging on federal lands in Washington, Oregon and Northern California.

Working with the timber industry under a lawsuit settlement, the Bush administration has been trying to increase logging levels, but has repeatedly been stymied by court rulings.

Meanwhile, owl numbers have continued to decline. The new threat from the barred owl has led to arguments from the timber industry that it is no longer necessary to protect so much old growth if there are no owls living in it.

"We are drawn to the conclusion that (the recovery plan) will not achieve the basic interest of spotted owl conservation," the society's reviewers wrote. "We come to this conclusion because the spotted owl is one of the most studied species ever listed under the (Endangered Species Act), yet there is no reliance in this plan on the breadth and depth of the information available to create a scientifically credible plan."

The plans were also reviewed independently by The Wildlife Society, a leading professional organization of wildlife biologists, which also found the recovery plan so deeply flawed that it should be scrapped and a new one developed from scratch.
Money doesn't grow on trees

BY CHRIS BRATT

When I was a child and wanted something the family couldn't afford, my mother would say to me, “You know, Christopher, money doesn't grow on trees.” Well, the reality is, I need to repeat my mother's admonition to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Forest Service, county officials, and many of my fellow Oregonians.

The fact is, we can no longer expect to pay for the ever-expanding social needs of our society with the money we receive from federal timber receipts. Selling and cutting trees from our public forests to support vital public services such as libraries, public health, law enforcement, county road maintenance, etc., will never again provide the level of financial relief needed for these services across rural Oregon.

The U.S. Congress, in passing the Oregon and California Lands Act of 1937 (O and C Act), agreed to give one half of the receipts from federal timber sales to the western Oregon counties that contained O and C lands. For many years these timber receipts were enough to enable these counties to fund basic county services. But today, smaller trees are being sold because of past overcutting of our old growth forests, new more stringent laws are protecting the environment and more science-based management plans are being implemented. The revenue picture has changed dramatically, including the fact that many offered timber sales have no buyers. The dream of money from trees has faded for Oregon counties. The revenue from selling public timber can provide only a small fraction of the needed county funds.

Due to some progressive thinking by previous Clinton administration officials, local environmental groups and some elected representatives, Congress has continued to provide financial relief to Oregon's O and C counties for more than a decade. Counties have received additional Treasury funds when annual timber sale revenues fall below the highest amounts counties received in the mid-1980s. Although this formula was not intended to provide permanent funding, it has stabilized county revenues. It also has broken the century-old practice of linking the funding of vital public with fluctuating timber harvests.

The fact is, we can no longer expect to pay for the ever-expanding social needs of our society with the money we receive from federal timber receipts.

Money doesn't grow on trees

After the last rural county funding legislation outlined above expired in September 2007, Oregon's Congressional delegation has only recently been able to secure a one-year extension of these county timber payments. In the meantime, Jackson County libraries have closed and soon other public agency layoffs are anticipated throughout southern Oregon. The Bush administration and many in Congress are not wanting to extend the legislation or provide another replacement for O and C county timber revenues.

Unfortunately, the Bush administration and their political appointees managing the BLM and Forest Service have an idea of their own. Guess what? They once again want 18 Oregon counties to rely strictly on federal timber receipts to fund their vital services. They want to revise current agency timber management plans to allow more trees to be cut from public forests to fund these counties.

Cutting more trees to get more money for Oregon's counties is not a new idea. It's just an old bad idea that will further degrade our forests by lowering environmental protections now in place. It is the same destructive forest management scheme that the BLM and Forest Service had practiced for decades prior to implementing the Northwest Forest Plan in 1995. It is an idea put forward by the timber industry, and one that the Bush administration has promised to implement before leaving office. It is simply an excuse to supply more wood for timber interests.

The BLM and Forest Service admit that in the late 1980s and early 1990s timber sales on federal land and the resulting revenue to counties decreased sharply. These federal agencies still contend the drop in timber money for counties was caused by “legal challenges and harvest adjustments to meet the habitat needs of the Northern Spotted Owl,” and not their disregard for the owl or federal laws such as the Endangered Species Act. We can rest assured that if these agencies continue to break the law or don't meet their own legal requirements, there will be further legal challenges and again sharply reduced county revenues.

As I've suggested before, it would be a lot simpler to have the federal government send payments to rural counties in lieu of property tax for the lands the agencies manage. (Approximately 50 percent of Jackson and Josephine Counties are managed by federal agencies.) Any monies received from timber sales would then go back to the U.S. Treasury. The rural counties also would have a fair, reliable and permanent solution to their funding dilemma.

Maybe the solution is too simple. But if you agree with my mother that money doesn't grow on trees, let the agencies know. And while you're at your computer or desk, ask them to maintain their current management based on the Northwest Forest Plan in their upcoming Western Oregon Plan Revisions.

Give me a call if you need help.

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